

2000

Year in Review



▲ **Natural resource inventories in the national park system** received a significant boost in FY 2000 when Congress appropriated \$7.3 million under the Natural Resource Challenge for this purpose, particularly vascular plant and vertebrate inventories. Water quality inventories, now completed or under way in 31 parks with inadequate water quality baselines, are also supported by this funding increase. Natural resource monitoring, like the long-term water quality monitoring shown here in Shenandoah National Park, will benefit from Challenge funding increases in 2001.

The year 2000 in review

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If the year 2000 is any indication and as many scientists suggest, this may well be the century of the environment. In 2000, the National Park Service focused on its resources to a greater extent than it has in a long time.

The cornerstone of success this year was significant support from Congress for the second year of the proposed five-year Natural Resource Challenge program. This enabled the Service to make major strides in natural resource management. Details are highlighted herein, but include our participation in 10 cooperative ecosystem studies units on university campuses, the selection of five learning centers (to support researchers logistically and provide interpretation of science to visitors), and the establishment of four exotic plant management teams and a Sabbatical in the Parks program. The effort to provide inventories of vascular plants and vertebrate animals in parks took a giant leap forward with the funds provided by Congress. The U.S. Geological Survey, including its Biological Resources Division, also had a significant budget increase this year. We made great progress in promoting “parks for science” and “science for parks” under the Natural Resource Challenge.



The Discovery 2000 conference in September—a dialogue focused on the future of the national park system, and our vision for it—was also a major achievement for the Service. We were particularly honored by the participation of Professors E. O. Wilson and Peter Raven, both of whom see important future roles for the Service in the stewardship of the nation’s biodiversity. This role is largely a logical restatement of the original language of the NPS Organic Act of 1916, which charges the Service with conserving the “scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein.” Each national park is a complex manifestation of processes and players. Plant and animal species are the players responding to physical processes of the place, and to each other. Conservation of the plants and animals in over 380 units with 83 million acres makes the National Park Service, inescapably, a factor in the preservation of much of our nation’s biodiversity.

Revision of *NPS Management Policies* in 2000 included a clear statement that ends the misconception that we, in managing parks, must balance equally the protection of resources and the provision of visitor services. Both must be served, but cannot receive equal weight in every decision without gradual erosion of the resources that visitors come to enjoy. This does not mean that visitor access must be curtailed, but it does mean that we must know enough to be able to provide services and accommodations without compromising park resources to the point of impairment. As Wallace Stegner put it, resources are “first in logic, first in law,” and recent court decisions have borne this out for the National Park Service. Parks can be better hosts for present and increasing future publics if we become better accumulators and synthesizers of information. Along these lines, this year also saw the development of the companion Cultural Resource Challenge. These events were all extremely positive for the future of national parks.

In the *Year in Review*, we also document the setbacks and new issues of the year. Without doubt the Cerro Grande fire was the low point of this year. In May, the National Park Service set a prescribed fire that escaped control and caused enormous damage to the local communities around Bandelier National Monument (including Los Alamos, New Mexico, and others). Needless to say, we felt genuine anguish in the park, the region, and the national park system over the error and apologized for our role in it. There was also a prompt review of fire policies and operational procedures but the damage had been done. Although Cerro Grande was extremely unfortunate, the fire management program of the National Park Service should not be judged by this one event. Since 1968 we have applied nearly 3,800 prescribed fires with success. Prescribed fire is critical to meeting resource management objectives and reducing hazardous fuel loads. Indeed, the prevalence of wildfires across the West this year was a harsh reminder for many agencies and citizens that years of misguided suppression of forest fires bears a price. One legacy of failing to recognize the role of fire in natural systems is its strong testament to the necessity of understanding the dynamics of natural systems before management policies and decisions are made. Herein you will find a summary of the extraordinary 2000 fire season.

In both advancement toward understanding the natural systems we manage and stark evidence of the need for better information and higher levels of professional support for our parks, the first year of the 21st century has more than lived up to our expectations.